A Full and Faithful Life
2. Praying and Forgiving
March 20, 2011

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Psalm 103
Psalm 51:1–12
Matthew 6:9–15

"If you forgive others . . . your heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses."
Matthew 6:14–15 (NRSV)

To be forgiven is a miracle. It comes from God. . . . God's forgiveness is something that happens inside us, not inside God, freeing us of the shame of the past so that we can be different people, choosing and acting differently in the future.

Harold Kushner
Quoted in Simon Wiesenthal's
***The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*.**

We are grateful, dear God, at a time of high anxiety and tragedy and uncertainty for the world and for our nation, to be here together. In these quiet moments, speak the word to us which we need. Open our hearts and our minds to a love that will never let us go, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say, 'I am spiritual but not religious,' then I might not be any wiser about what that means, but I would be richer." That is how Barbara Brown Taylor begins her bestselling book *An Altar in the World*. She speaks for many of us in this business. People say it to us all the time: on airplanes, when your seatmate discovers that he's sitting beside a minister; in the study when you ask the groom-to-be about his religious affiliation. "I'm spiritual, just not religious." By religious they mean this: church, creeds, confessions, hymns. They have read enough negativity about institutional religion—the scandals, the way religion seems to fuel bigotry and hatred and violence, the fact that Christians can't resist arguing with one another and consigning one another to hell—to conclude that they want nothing to do with it. But spiritual—what does that mean? Taylor thinks it's a way of saying that "they have a sense of the divine depth

of things, would like to ‘feel closer to God’ . . . a longing for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life.”

She thinks that the problem is that we have lost touch with the behavioral expression of our faith, the practices that mark and define one as a follower of Jesus. Five times a day Muslims stop what they are doing, get out their prayer mat, get down on their knees, put their forehead on the ground—the physical act is a form of praying, a way of believing. Roman Catholics cross themselves and kneel. Catholics and Muslims have beads to help them pray. We Presbyterians don’t have any specific behavior to express our faith except sit in a pew and think about it.

Barbara Brown Taylor; Craig Dykstra, head of the Religion Department at the Lilly Endowment; and Dorothy Bass, Professor of Religion at Valparaiso University are distinguished Christian thinkers who are writing about Christian practices—the practices Christians perform in the world: loving neighbors, welcoming strangers, attending to the poor, feeding the hungry, working for justice, fasting, studying scripture.

And so this brief Lenten series of sermons on the things Christians do because they are Christians, “Living a Full and Faithful Life,” with a closer look this morning “Praying and Forgiving.”

When a church makes it into the newspaper. it is usually not good news: a fight, something terrible has happened, someone ran off with the offering. To make the front page, it has to be pretty dramatic. The only time I recall it happening here on the front page was on March 8, 1998, when I planned to preach a series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer and decided to substitute the new ecumenical version for the traditional Lord’s Prayer: no thee’s and thou’s; “sins” instead of “debts” and “trespasses.” The fact that the traditional Lord’s Prayer is in the bulletin this morning and every Sunday morning is an indicator of how that experiment concluded. The *Tribune’s* first page announced, “On Sunday, at Chicago’s venerable Fourth Presbyterian Church, the words [of the Lord’s Prayer] are going to change. Instead of ‘hallowed be thy name’ it will be ‘your name.’ Instead of ‘lead us into temptation’ the congregation will implore ‘save us from the time of trial.’” The only thing good about this incident, from my perspective, is at least the *Tribune* didn’t call us “the tony Fourth Presbyterian Church”—for once. “Venerable” is a lot better.

Some people liked the modern version, more did not. A lot more. When the church staff discussed it, the consensus was that we had more important issues to deal with. Why waste our time talking about “thee” or “you”? Dana Ferguson said, “I’ve been saying ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ since I was a child and I’m not going to change now, regardless of what you put in the bulletin. The

old words were just fine." So when the sermon series ended, so did the new version of the Lord's Prayer.

However it is translated, it is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. It was the Jewish custom personally to pray three times a day: once in the early morning: once in the middle of the afternoon and once at sunset. A good Jew stopped what he was doing at 3:00 pm and prayed. It was the abuse of this custom which Jesus criticized; the person who arranges to be at the busiest street corner at 3:00 and prays loudly and fervently and thoroughly enjoys the admiration of those who see and hears him observing his devotion and piety. "Go into your room," Jesus said, "shut the door and pray inconspicuously."

Here's an example of what your prayer should be – "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Scholars point out that the Lord's Prayer is a thoroughly Jewish prayer; could well have been prayed in the Synagogue then, or today, for that matter. And it also expresses Jesus' teachings, beginning with the presence of a loving father. He was unique in using an intimate word to address God in a word children use to address their fathers – Abba. He prayed for the kingdom to come, for the will of God to be done, for daily bread, forgiveness, and a final affirmation that God is all in all.

It's a model of how to pray. And it is, itself, a beautiful prayer, prayed in all sorts of circumstances for 2,000 years, always appropriate during corporate worship or on a battlefield, beside a hospital bed, at a wedding or a memorial service, or privately. When you can't come up with words of your own, pray the "Our Father" in the early morning, at midday, and at day's end: "Hallowed be thy name; thy will be done; daily bread; forgive us our trespasses."

Busy people living in a secular society find it difficult to pray. Many of us begin the day with the Fourth Church daily devotion and prayer online, but not all, not every day. Sometimes we can't find time for that even. It is important to take time to pray: to be intentionally in the presence of God. I've always thought that it is equally important to learn how to pray on the run. And so I've always been interested in, and sometimes use, one of the most ancient Christian prayers, devised by fifth-century monks in monasteries in the Egyptian desert, a prayer known as "the Jesus prayer": "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." The monks chanted the prayer over and over again. Sometimes they called it the "Breath Prayer," saying the first phrase as you inhale, the second as you exhale. Fifteen centuries later, medical science understands that breathing deeply and regularly and intentionally has positive physical effects. Harvard's Dr. Herbert Benson wrote a book, *The Relaxation Response,* that advocates deep breathing to relieve stress and relates it to the ancient

monastic Jesus prayer. You can do it while you're jogging, on the treadmill, exercise bike, or walking down Michigan Avenue. As you inhale "Lord Jesus Christ"; as you exhale "have mercy"; "Lord Jesus Christ" . . . "grant me peace."

Jesus circled back and lifted one idea for special emphasis from the prayer he taught his disciples: forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Presbyterians say "debts." Methodists, Lutherans, and most others say "trespasses." The New Testament has it both ways. We say "debts," someone observed, because Presbyterians would rather have debts paid than their sins forgiven.

The intriguing thing here is that Jesus tied together being forgiven by God and forgiving others. In fact, the way he put it, you can't have one without the other. "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you."

Put another way, the refusal to forgive actually blocks God's forgiveness (Douglas Hare, *Interpretation:Matthew* p. 69).

Now let's admit that this is a difficult topic for all of us. The words fall easily from our lips, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," but everything in us resists the notion of forgiving—large affronts and small. We simply don't want to do it. It feels so good to be angry. It feels so right to resent,and hold a grudge and to wait for payback time. Frederick Buechner says somewhere that we love the taste of anger at someone who has wronged us: we roll it around in our mouths as long as possible, savoring every last drop.

In addition, we're not convinced that there is anything all that wrong with us, so we don't really need to repent and confess and be forgiven. Garrison Keillor has great fun with it in an essay, "The Current Crisis in Remorse." In place of the standard Prayer of Confession we would prefer something like this:

> Lord, we approach thy throne of Grace, having committed acts, which we do heartily acknowledge, must be very difficult for thee to understand. Nevertheless, we do beseech thee to postpone judgment and give thy faithful servants the benefit of the doubt until such time as we are able to answer all thy questions fully and clear our reputations in heaven. (*We Are Still Married,* p. 24)

We pray our Prayer of Confession weekly in worship, but it remains difficult for us personally. How are you supposed to forgive someone who has hurt you seriously, permanently, how to forgive the great criminals in history: Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Osama bin Laden?

Simon Wiesenthal, a survivor of Nazi Germany's concentration camps, devoted his life to identifying and bringing to justice Nazi war criminals. He wrote a classic study: *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness.* The title comes from the Wehrmacht custom of putting a sunflower on the graves of Nazi soldiers. There was a military cemetery beside his concentration camp, and the prisoners saw the sunflowers on Nazi graves every day.

One day Wiesenthal, a prisoner, was summoned to the bedside of a young S.S. trooper who was dying. The young man wished to die in peace and wanted to confess and be forgiven by a Jew. Wiesenthal was chosen. The soldier's name was Karl. Raised a Catholic, he joined the Hitler Youth and the S.S. as soon as he was old enough. He participated in the horrors of Nazi persecution and genocide against the Jews. Wiesenthal was surprised and wary and uncomfortable as Karl went on to describe in terrible detail a ghastly incident in which he was involved: Jews crowded into a house—families with children—gasoline—hand grenades—machine guns. As he is dying, he can't get the picture out of his mind. He needs to confess and to be forgiven. Wiesenthal listens and thinks but finally cannot forgive—or refuse to forgive—so he stands up and silently walks away from the dying soldier and leaves the room. The second part of the book is "What Would You Do?" Wiesenthal invited a group of religious, political, and moral leaders to contribute essays. On the twentieth anniversary of the book, it was republished with new contributors: the Dalai Lama, Fr. Theodore Hessburgh, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Marty, Rabbi Harold Kushner. It makes fascinating reading. Fr. Hesburgh said that his instincts as a priest were to forgive. Some said they didn't know what they would have done. Many agreed that no one individual has the right to forgive this man his monstrous behavior. Some said no, no way, not ever.

I was intrigued by Rabbi Kushner's response. He wrote the bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People,* and he is a wise pastor. He wrote,

> Forgiving happens inside us. It represents a letting go of the sense of grievance and, perhaps most importantly, letting go of the role of victim. For a Jew to forgive a Nazi would not mean, God forbid, saying to them: "What you did was understandable. I can understand what led you to do it and I do not hate you for it." It would mean saying, "What you did was thoroughly despicable and puts you outside the category of decent human beings. But I refuse to let your blind hatred define the shape and content of my Jewishness."

Rabbi Kushner told about a woman in his synagogue, a single mother with three young children whose husband had abandoned them for a younger woman. “How can you tell me to forgive him?” she asked. Kushner responded, “I’m asking you to forgive because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into an angry, bitter woman. I’d like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is physically, but you keep holding on to him. You’re not hurting him by holding onto that resentment, but you’re hurting yourself.”

Now, I confess, I have as much trouble with this as anyone else. I do not find it easy to forgive. It is difficult. It is so much easier to hold on to your hurt: when someone is ignoring your needs, to withdraw into your wounded ego and ignore her needs or his needs. We have trouble forgiving trivial slights; how in the world are we ever to forgive huge ones? My teacher and mentor in this matter is a faithful member of my congregation. Her pregnant sister and brother-in-law were brutally murdered by a sixteen-year-old high-school student. The murderer was identified after a few weeks and arrested in his suburban home, with his scrapbook, news clippings of the crime. He is in jail for life. He has never apologized or expressed remorse. She, incredibly, is an advocate for the abolition of the death penalty—which, by the way, was abolished in the state of Illinois two weeks ago thanks to her efforts and those of a lot of people like her. She contributed a fine essay to a book, *Religion and the Death Penalty*, which is the best that I have ever read on the subject from a Christian perspective. She’s an attorney and with lawyerly logic recites and refutes all the classic arguments for the death penalty. At the end she becomes specifically and intentionally Christian. Listen to what she says about forgiveness:

> Does healing require forgiveness? As a Christian I believe it does. Let me be clear: I forgive Nancy’s killer not because he has an excuse—he had none whatsoever. I forgive not because he asked for it—he has not. I do not forgive for him. Rather, I forgive for the One who asked and taught me to—for God. I forgive for the author and perfecter of my faith—Jesus Christ.
>
> I also forgive for myself. It is said that living with hate is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Hating my sister’s killer would not affect him at all, but I believe it would devour me.

And then she wrote a better conclusion than I or anyone who has not experienced what she has experienced could possibly come up with: “Here’s what we know about Jesus Christ whose name I bear when I call myself Christian. In his dying moments, Jesus, himself a victim of crucifixion, the Roman Empire’s particularly ghastly brand of state execution, requested forgiveness for his executioners.”

That is where it rests then. We believe in a God who loves us so much as to have high expectations for us; loves us enough to hold us accountable for how we live our lives. We believe in a God who is forgiving, a God of second chances, a God who wants reconciliation and restoration and healing and wholeness for every one of us. Jesus taught us to believe in a God who can be addressed intimately, deeply personally—Abba, as a trusting child addresses a strong and loving mother or father; a God, the psalmist promised, who does not count or remember our iniquities, who will not define us by our failures and sin; a God who wants us to be free to live whole and joyful and faithful lives.

A God who came among us in that same Jesus, the one who lived and died expressing the profound reality of God's love and who taught and continues to teach us with one of the last things he said before he died: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The same Jesus who taught followers to pray, Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors . . .

Amen.